

Witness to Brokenness

Ezekiel 34: 15-24 Matthew 25: 31-40

This is the final Sunday in our liturgical – church – calendar year. The readings lead us to the theme of the day which is Christ the King. At the fulfillment of all things, the Christ ascends to his throne and assumes the helm of his realm over all life. A search for images of Christ the King reveals exactly what you'd expect. A bearded white guy wears a bejeweled crown on his head, a lush red or purple brocade robe over his shoulders, a scepter in one hand and a globe topped with a cross in the other. He looks like a king, befitting the image of any king we might have seen in history.

Of course, the imagery is all wrong if it's supposed to be any reflection of what Jesus talks about in the gospels. We're led astray by such images of the worldly king arrayed in pomp and splendor. Jesus was all about humility and self-sacrifice in loving service to others. The church has struggled throughout its existence with these opposite images of worldly and spiritual, of projected power and servant humility.

Despite the conflicted nature of the church, as people of faith, we're called to reckon with the true nature of the King and his Kingdom. No, the church, its history and tradition, is not actually a helpful guide in understanding the way of the Kingdom. The one, true guide available to us comes from the record of Jesus' expressions in the gospels. And those expressions find a reflection in the writings of the Hebrew scriptures with which Jesus was familiar and based his insights.

The passage from the prophet Ezekiel is aligned with what God expects from the royal rulers of his people. His message expresses God's disdain and condemnation for their royal failures and gives us insight into what should be markedly different when it comes to those who would be entrusted with governance.

Bear in mind that in the ancient Near East, the king or ruler was typically described in the role of a shepherd to the people. The 23rd Psalm's "The Lord is my shepherd" has royal overtones, but whether "the Lord" there refers to King David or to God can be debated.

Ezekiel tells how God becomes the shepherd of his flock. Why? Those who have been given authority as shepherds have been doing a lousy job addressing the concerns that are uppermost in God's agenda. Instead of pursuing their job diligently and faithfully in line with God's expectations, they've been exploiting the sheep, lining their pockets, and abusing their power. These royal shepherds don't care about the sheep that are lost, struggling, broken, and failing. These sheep under their care are suffering and the royals are indifferent as they pursue their own wealth and aggrandizement. Ominously God intones, ***I will shepherd the flock with justice*** since you worldly rulers have failed to do so. God will become their shepherd after taking down the fat and powerful, and binding up the wounded and renewing the weak.

Having dealt with “shepherds who feed on the flock,” the metaphor now shifts to a discussion about sleek sheep and skinny sheep, between rams and goats, continuing the idea that the fat and strong ones have rewarded themselves too generously at the expense of the weak who get exploited.

God has seen what’s been going on. Not only have the fat and strong taken good care of themselves, they’ve also ensured that the weak, lost, and broken will **always** remain so and never get a break.

Through Ezekiel, God asks: *Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the water with your feet?* God, as always, has provided plenty for all so that all may prosper. However, the fat and the strong have not only put themselves at the head of the line, but have also been gluttons. Like pigs, they consume far more than their fair share, far more than they could possibly need or use. Thoughtlessly, they leave behind a mess that could have meant something to the weak, lost, and broken others among them. They don’t care. They’re indifferent to others whose needs don’t even register. This is not what God wants or expects.

Yes, God has had enough, and when that happens, the meaty and the mighty better look out.

The passage goes on to describe God deciding between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. God promises to bring justice, to stop the looting and the bullying, to stop the greedy feeding and the ugly violence of it. The notion of a ruler from the Davidic line is presented. *I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them.* God establishing God’s rule, and its emphasis will be justice to bring strength to the weak, hospitality to the lost, and healing for the broken.

The separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 borrows directly from the imagery of Ezekiel 34 with the mantle of “my servant David” being taken by Jesus as he gives a final description of the fulfillment of his mission in establishing his Kingdom. For Christians, Jesus was this ruler of the Davidic line who fulfills prophecies like Ezekiel’s. Jesus is Lord, and King of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus describes the Son of Man, the King on his sacred throne in the Kingdom of God, Shepherd of his people as Ezekiel prophesied, here acting in his role as Chief Judge in the Kingdom of God. To some, he offers the fulfillment of the promise of blessing in this Kingdom. He says, *For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

The righteous ones have no recollection of ministering to Jesus in this way. *We never did that for you,* they say. Jesus replies, *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.*

The righteous did not understand that Jesus was present in that person to whom they gave food, gave drink, offered compassion, friendship, justice, and mercy.

And surely if those condemned had only *known* Jesus was there, they would have acted differently. But wasn't that the point? The spirit of those who were truly faithful did not measure their actions by how appropriate it would be, how sensible it was, how practical it may seem, or if other people would do such a thing. They did not consider judging as their entitled prerogative, or blaming as the first response, or looking the other way in avoidance, or calculating whether a gesture was deserved. By their faithful spirit, they simply knew what to do and were faithful in doing it.

So, the King appears to have been among us in disguise. If a commoner weds a royal and enters a whole new world of tradition and privilege that surrounds royal families, imagine how surprising it is to discover that the King of Glory is on the chow line at the soup kitchen with an empty plate, sleeping in a box under a bridge, wearing a striped jumpsuit in a jail, or is that brown-skinned refugee seeking to forge a new life. This is not where we expect to encounter the King of Heaven and Earth, and it certainly is not who we expect.

Going beyond such things, the compassion of the righteous, and the grace of those strong in faith and commitment gets weighed and judged. It is not the well-connected, well-heeled, and outwardly devout who are esteemed and rewarded. Rather, *it's what people do* that tells the story of their faith.

My sermon title sounds like I developed a lisp, or failed to fix a typo. You know that we Christians speak a lot about our witness, our faithfulness to Jesus' ministry and mission which gets interpreted by different people in different ways. The scriptures make it plain for us to see. Jesus' ministry and mission is focused on the weak, poor, sick, imprisoned, excluded, and in a word, broken people.

Our witness should not be focused on anything else but broken people. And that doesn't mean giving them lip service, but putting them at the center of our witness in ministry. The well-heeled, secure, healthy, free, and popular people are taken care of. When those people who are taken care of profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and assemble themselves as the body of Christ in ministry and mission, the focus must be on the broken people around us.

That lispy, strange "h" stuck in the middle of the word "witness" reminds us of the nature of our ministry to the broken. Not at arm's length, not at a safe distance, not through a third party, not with thoughts and prayers, but rather in being with the people who are broken. That's what we heard in those scriptures.

In Ezekiel 34, God promises to be **with** his sheep, becoming their shepherd. God is done waiting for the right ruler to come along. God intends to get hands-on involved in the plight of God's people. God is going to practice with-ness with God's broken sheep because worldly leaders, earthly shepherds do just the opposite. Those rulers stood indifferent to the broken; there was no with-ness to be found.

Jesus takes things one step further. Jesus is not only with the broken people. Jesus becomes the broken people. *For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in ... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.* Jesus' with-ness was so close to the broken people that Jesus was there himself to receive the ministry of faithful servants of the Kingdom, or Jesus was there himself to be ignored by those who ignored the Kingdom and remained indifferent to the suffering of the broken people of God.

Jesus was there to be told he didn't need food stamps; he needed to get a job. Jesus was there to see the motor homes roll into town from his cardboard shelter in the woods off the interstate. Jesus was there when he was accused of being a foreigner and told to go back where he came from because his kind weren't wanted in this country. Jesus was there when the poor man without a lawyer got a longer sentence than the other man with a good lawyer. Jesus was there, with God's broken people as the fat sheep and the bullying rams took what they wanted and spoiled what was left over.

Jesus invites us to join him in the work of the Kingdom, to join him in with-ness with the broken. No, Christ the King doesn't want us to be broken, too. That's rather pointless. But Jesus does want us to have that direct connection, to know and understand the brokenness of the other. It is the only way we can expect to be awakened, to have our eyes opened, to see and feel the ministry, to envision the Kingdom, and to actually understand what salvation means. That only happens in with-ness.

May we rejoice in the ministry and mission of Christ the King who shows the way forward toward the Kingdom of justice and peace. May we join in the servant ranks, ministering in with-ness with broken as agents of God's love, grace, and healing.